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Reagan praises Baker, pledges 2 'aggressive' years

Tower board lauded for letting 'chips fall'

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan, saying that his administration would be "wasting no time" to plan "another two years of aggressive work," said yesterday he was pleased that former Sen. Howard H. Baker had agreed to serve as his chief of staff.

"I've known Howard for years and have enormous respect for his abilities and talents," said the president, speaking in his weekly Saturday radio broadcast.

Mr. Reagan used the speech to again praise his national security review board, which last week gave him a highly critical assessment of White House handling of the clandestine Iran arms-sale operation.

"When I asked John Tower, Edmund Muskie and Brent Scowcroft to investigate the Iran affair, my attitude was to let the chips fall where they may," Mr. Reagan said of his three-member panel, which was chaired by Mr. Tower, a former Republican senator from Texas.

The stinging, 300-page report found that the U.S. initiative to sell weapons to Iran "became in fact a series of arms-for-hostages deals."

It also portrayed a confused president, who apparently was unaware of any diversion of arms-sale profits to aid the Nicaraguan contra rebels, but who also was unable to grasp the consequences of his actions.

"I told you, the American people, that I wanted all the facts to come out," the president said. "The board's effort is a demonstration of my commitment to find out what was wrong and fix it." He added that he was still "studying" the report.

The White House also announced that President Reagan stood by his nomination of Robert M. Gates to head the CIA, even though Senate Republican leaders had suggested that the nomination might be in trouble.

Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole of Kansas was canvassing other senators over the weekend, trying to determine whether there was enough support for Mr. Gates or whether the nomination should be pulled back from the Democratic-controlled Senate.

"If there's not enough support for Gates, it's likely they'll withdraw and put in somebody who can win," said one congressional source quoted by the Associated Press.

But presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said, "The president stands behind the nomination."

Mr. Gates, currently the CIA's deputy director, was nominated to replace William J. Casey, who resigned following surgery for brain cancer.

At the White House yesterday, as advisers sought to piece together yet another Iran-contra strategy with new staff leadership, Mr. Baker's two-man transition team met for 90 minutes with about a dozen senior presidential aides.

Longtime Baker aides James Cannon and Thomas Griscom, who are expected to be offered senior positions on the White House staff, met with political and legislative advisers to discuss Mr. Reagan's week ahead and an upcoming midweek televised address on the Tower board report.

Mr. Reagan, who is expected to meet further with congressional leaders and his Cabinet this week, also may begin traveling around the country — placing particular emphasis on his package for trade competitiveness — to quash public doubts about his ability to lead.

The president, while trying to fix his sights on the future, reserved a few moments in his Saturday radio speech for one of the more embattled figures in his past: Former Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan, whom the Tower board blamed for the "chaos" that ensued at the White House after the Iran-contra affair became known.

Mr. Regan, 68, who left the administration in an angry burst Friday, returned to the White House yesterday morning to clear his desk.

A day earlier, he had dashed off a cold letter that said merely, "I hereby

resign as Chief of Staff to the President of the United States."

A White House official, when asked yesterday about the brevity of the resignation letter, said Mr. Reagan learned that the president had asked Mr. Baker, 61, to replace him on a televised news report before he had personally been informed by the president.

The official, speaking on background yesterday, acknowledged that the handling of the matter had been botched.

"I can't imagine that it was planned that way," he said.

Mr. Regan, who generally declined to answer questions on his ouster when he arrived at the White House yesterday, said he would reserve comment on the matter until later.

Mr. Reagan, in his speech, offered to his ex-aide the warm goodbye that had been noticeably absent in the presidential statement issued Friday after Mr. Baker accepted the job.

"Don's been a friend and a valuable and trusted member of the administration," said the president, who termed Mr. Regan's six years of service as Treasury secretary and chief of staff "outstanding."

Meanwhile, North Carolina Sen. Terry Sanford, delivering the Democratic response to Mr. Reagan's radio address, said Congress took "no comfort from the disaster that has befallen the Reagan administration" and was ready to move beyond the Iran-contra affair.